NOTES ON THE NORTHERN WINTUN INDIANS*

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The following notes are based on the writer's boyhood recollections, forty and more years ago, of the Indians called Nomlaki, then living in the western part of Tehama County, along the upper portion of Elder and Thomes Creeks, in the vicinity of Lowrey, Paskenta, and Henleyville. The largest village with which the author was personally acquainted was on a confluent of Elder Creek, a few miles north of Henleyville.

In physical appearance these Indians were quite different from those of Pit River, and from the Konkaus of Maidu stock, who lived back of Chico. They were of medium stature and not notably inclined to be stout. Their features were good, and many women had beautiful hands and feet. The women generally wore their hair banged across the forehead. The men, as a rule, wore their hair short, searing it off with a coal. The beard was usually pulled out. The pubic hair was not removed, as it was by the Yuki and Pit River Indians. Tattooing was practised somewhat, but not extensively. The nose was occasionally perforated. I have some remembrance of seeing three or four shell beads (mempak) used as an ornament worn in the nose, but this was not customary. In general, bodily mutilations were not practised.

The various tribes of neighboring stocks were different from the Nomlaki in habits, implements, and physical appearance. The Yuki to the west were shorter, darker, rather broad, and with short necks and square shoulders. They were simpler or of a lower order in most things pertaining to their houses and mode of life. They were said to store no food, but to live from day to day. The Pit River Indians to the northeast resembled eastern Indians in general appearance, looking as though they might be related to tribes such as the Cheyenne. Their sharp eyes and pronounced features contrasted with the heavier and rather square features of the Nomalki. The Konkay, of Maidu stock, to the east, seemed taller than the Nomlaki, and in certain ways resembled Hawaiians in their appearance.

The Nomlaki lived in a beautiful country with rolling hills and valleys, well watered and wooded. There were many springs, and it was near these that they generally lived. While the country mostly inhabited was between the Sacramento River and the Coast Range, trips were made to the river for the salmon-runs, and in the fall to gather wild grapes, while pine-nuts were gathered in the mountains. The mountains proper were not ordinarily inhabited. There was a strip of probably about twenty-five miles where no one lived. The crest of the range was the dividing-line between the two peoples. Any one found over the divide was likely to precipitate trouble. There was not very

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much intercourse across the Sacramento River. The people east of the river were reputed more warlike. The Nomlaki do not appear to have been troubled much with wars, the river protecting them on one side, and the mountains on the other. Ordinarily they lived perhaps ten or fifteen miles west of the river, and five or six miles east of the mountains. They themselves were peaceable and free from care. Having almost always abundant food and easy circumstances, they lacked incentive to war and expeditions for plunder.

Within their own speech or family they called the people to the north of them Wailaki ("north language"), and those to the south Noimok.

Articles of trade were principally salt, obsidian, and shells for beads. Salt was gathered by the Nomlaki at salt springs, and was always more or less mixed with dirt.

Obsidian was obtained by trade. A lump as large as a man's head brought articles to the value of twenty dollars. It was chipped with a wire about the size of a lead pencil. A piece of skin was used with it to protect the hand.

The shells used for making beads came from the south. They were large clams, four or five inches long and three inches wide. These beads, which were called mempak ("water-bone"), were the principal article of value and exchange. Their value depended on their thickness rather than on their size, and also in large measure on their age and the degree of polish which they had acquired by carrying and use.

Cylinders of colored stone perforated longitudinally, and strung with disk beads, were brought from Lake County, and were very valuable, bringing from five to ten dollars.

Shells and shell beads other than mempak were not much used. Dentalia and haliotis were known and somewhat employed, but were little valued.

The principal villages were more or less permanently inhabited. They were always situated where wood and water were abundant, and consisted usually of about five or six houses. These were often arranged more or less regularly in rows. The houses in appearance were mound-shaped. The supports and frame were of oak logs and were thatched. The entrance was low, so that it was necessary to stoop to pass through it. In the centre of the house was the fire, the smoke coming out through a hole at the top. The houses were small, averaging perhaps a dozen feet in diameter.

The so-called sweat-house, which was really a dance-house, was larger. The ground was excavated for it. The frame rested largely on a centre pole from which logs radiated. The centre pole was not used in the dwelling-houses. The dance-house was not used for ordinary purposes or sleeping. It was distinctly festive and ceremonial in character. It was not used for sweating. Many of these houses were built where there was no water available for swimming after a sweat.

Conditions of life were unusually favorable. The country was covered with wild oats, which had only to be beaten into baskets when ripe. The hills were studded with oaks, from which acorns were obtained. From these

both bread and soup were made. The bread was of two kinds, one white, the other black. The latter was rather sweet, and appears to have been made with the admixture of a certain kind of clay. At any rate, this clay was used as food, being mixed with acorn-flour. The wild oats were parched with live-coals in flat circular baskets, which were given a continuous tossing motion. The coals not only roasted the grains, but burned the chaff. After parching, the oats were pounded to meal. Buckeyes were eaten after the poison had been extracted by leaching or filtration.

There was some provision for the future in the matter of vegetable food. Inclosures of wattles for preserving oats and seeds were made near the house, and sometimes in the house. Acorns were also stored. Besides other methods, the following was employed in years when there was a large crop. The acorns were put into boggy holes near a spring, where the water flowed over them continuously. In this way they would keep for years.

Their fishing was very simple. Salmon in many cases could literally be scooped out, especially when they ran up small streams. Fish-traps of branches were also quickly and readily made. These had wing-dams leading to them; and the fish, on arriving at the end of the trap, rolled out of the water. The Sacramento River at certain seasons was full of salmon, so that from this source alone the Indians were absolutely relieved from serious trouble about their food.

Game was equally abundant, the quantity of deer and elk being enormous. Rabbits and squirrels were of course proportionately plentiful. The principal method of hunting was driving. In this way rabbits and deer were killed. Large parties were formed to drive the game over a certain territory to a particular point. Much noise was made to confuse the animals, which were finally driven into nets. In hunting rabbits, knobbed throwing-sticks were used. These were perhaps four feet long, made of a stick from a shrub with a piece of root attached. The thickness was about that of a man's thumb. The Indians could throw these sticks with great accuracy, and kill rabbits more effectively with them than with arrows. Besides being important in the hunt, these sticks were used in games of skill.

When rabbits and small game were killed, the body was skinned and cleaned. It was then laid on a stone and pounded with a pestle until thoroughly crushed. After this it was cooked and eaten entire.

Grasshoppers, larvae of bees and wasps, and worms, were eaten. Snakes and lizards were not eaten, and much aversion was felt to the oysters of the whites. Grasshoppers were captured by being driven after the grass had been fired. Worms were taken when the ground was sodden with rain. A stick was put into the earth and worked around and around. All the worms within a radius of five or six feet came rushing out of the ground, and were simply gathered up. They were eaten cooked.

The chief possessed little but nominal authority. Conditions may possible have been different in this respect before the coming of the Americans. One of the principal functions of a chief or prominent man was haranguing. The speaker used a different inflection of the voice when haranguing, and repeated words over and over. Much of the harangues was difficult to understand.

They were unintelligible to me, and appear to have been partly so at least to the younger Indians. A man that could harangue well was considered an important person.

There was no system of punishment for crime or offence. I never knew of a case of murder within the tribe. Adultery does not seem to have been punished except by beating. The Indians did not seem to have violent passions, but were a jolly, light-hearted people.

They were taciturn only on one occasion. If one went for a visit, there was no greeting. The visitor sat down, and for some time no one said a word. This was customary and proper when a visit was made. After a considerable time they would begin to speak of the object of the visit.

Ordinarily only three terms of color were used, -- kula ("black"); tluyoka ("white"); and tedeka ("colored").

When a person saw a desirable piece of fallen wood, he stood it up against a tree, thereby establishing his ownership of it. This ownership was respected. In general, the indians were not at all thievish. Fire-wood was sometimes brought in by the men as well as by the women.

At death, mourners, usually old women, often came from a distance. They were paid for their services. They blackened their faces and breasts with tar, allowing it to remain on the skin until it fell off. The younger women ordinarily did not disfigure themselves in this way. The hair was cut short in mourning. Crying, lamenting, and singing went on during the day and at night. Valuables were generally buried with the body. The effects of the dead were burned. In addition to these observances at the death, gatherings for the purpose of mourning for the dead were held also at other times.

The names of the dead were not mentioned. People were also very reluctant to mention their own names, and were offended if asked.

One of the principal amusements was shooting at a mark with arrows. Another game was to throw hunting-sticks at a mark. What was known as the grass game was used for gambling. This was a guessing-game played with bones held in the hand. In addition, there was a guessing-game played with a large number of slender sticks resembling the game-sets of the Hupa.

There were professional doctors who were paid for their services. Their chief remedy was sucking. Medicines were used little or not at all. The doctors put objects into their mouths and pretended to draw them from the sick person. Often this object seems to have been a piece of deer-sinew chewed until white and soft.

These Indians possessed secret societies. They were reluctant to reveal anything concerning them. One was called ɔo'mali ("fire-makers"). In dances, head-bands of yellowhammer-feathers were used. On special occasions there were also large headdresses of eagle-feathers. In dancing, certain persons acted extravagantly, apparently to provoke applause. At a girl's first menstruation there was a ceremony at which a dance was held.